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The Theme and Variations in Piano  
Composition from Haydn to Brahms



THE THEME AND VARIATIONS IN PIANO COMPOSITION FROM HAYDN TO BRAHMS

BY

LENORE DU BOIS

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THESIS

FOR THE

Degree of

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IN

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UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

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..... August 10 ..... 1920 .....

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

..... Lenore Du Bois .....

ENTITLED..... THE THEME AND VARIATIONS IN PIANO COMPOSITIONS .....

..... FROM HAYDN TO BRAHMS .....

IS APPROVED BY ME AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

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THE THEME AND VARIATIONS IN PIANO COMPOSITION  
FROM HAYDN TO BRAHMS.


I INTRODUCTION

The theme with variations, in the hands of an unskilled composer, may be a very trivial kind of piece; but when used by a great master it becomes one of the most elaborate and most impressive forms of composition. All of the great composers have made frequent use of variations, often giving them a place as one movement of a sonata or symphony. Sometimes a familiar or popular melody is used as the foundation, while at other times the variations are on an original theme. Since there is no set form for this type of composition it gives the composer great liberty and opportunity to show his power to the utmost. He is able to use his originality and to display his resourcefulness. Stanford<sup>1</sup> says, "Variations are to free composition what counterpoint is to technic,- the master-key of the whole building. Sections of the Sonata-form, such as the episodes between statements of themes, the development (or free fantasia) and the coda, all depend upon the knowledge of writing variations".

Although this account is to be limited to variations composed for the pianoforte from the time of Haydn to Brahms, yet a short account of the history of the development of this form of composition pre-

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1. Charles Villiers Stanford: "Musical Composition".



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vious to Haydn will be an aid to a more thorough understanding of the subject.

In the earlier days composers did not know how to make their melodies extend for more than a few measures, so very short themes were used. As numerous repetitions of a short theme made the music monotonous it was necessary to devise some means of disguising the repetition. In vocal composition a melody in long notes was given to some one voice, and the other voices made a counterpoint around it. In the various repetitions this counterpoint was varied, and new effects were produced. Later, when instrumental music was beginning to be developed, the same device was used. The early variations were called "doubles". Ornamental figures, runs and arpeggios were used extensively. In choral music this form did not last, but it has remained a regular form of instrumental composition although it has passed through many changes and elaborations until it has become vastly different from the original "Theme and Variations".

One of its earliest forms was really a set of several different themes with a variation on each one, each variation following its own theme. Various schemes were used for producing variety. Sometimes themes would be of contrasting types with the same style of variation for each one. Gradually variations took two forms, the melodic and the structural. In the former the melody was preserved and was always distinguishable. Bull's "Les Buffons" is an example of this type. The structural variation was one which was based entirely upon the harmonic structure. Of this type an example is found in "The Carman's Whistle" by Byrd. More and more freedom was used in the writing of variations, and at the time of Haydn it was





a well established form of composition.

The greatest composers of variations are, no doubt, Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. C. V. Stanford gives as the three most masterly examples, the "Goldberg Variations" of Bach, the Diabelli Variations<sup>1</sup> of Beethoven, and the "Haydn Variations of Brahms". There are, however, many other variations well worth studying and analyzing, some because of their intrinsic value, others because of their historical interest.

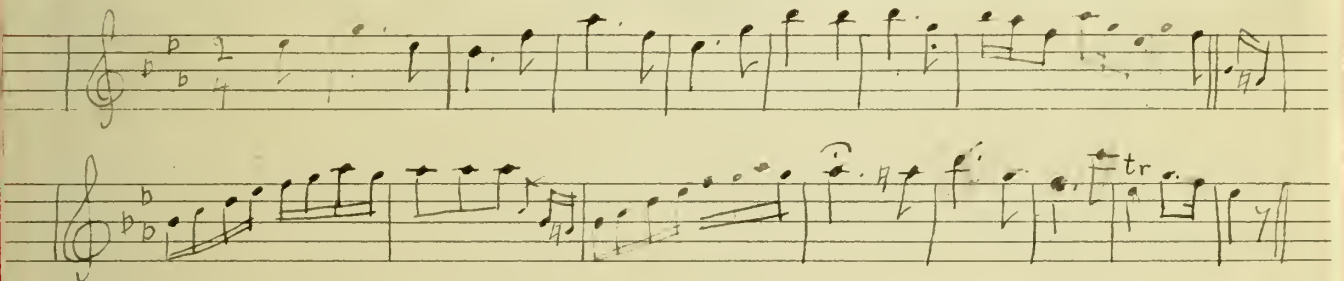
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1. Stanford: "Musical Composition".



## II THE THEME

In writing variations it is very important that a suitable theme be chosen. The ideal theme should be rather short but must possess some variety in order that the development of it may not become monotonous. It should also have some distinct characteristic, something which makes it worth elaborating. Themes, however, have often been chosen from popular melodies, and occasionally some have been used which did not seem really worth while. A good example of a well chosen theme is the one from the Eroica Symphony which Beethoven uses as the theme in a group of piano variations.



The melody is marked and the rhythm is distinct and possesses variety.

Some of the themes which Beethoven chooses from other sources are not so good. Stanford makes an interesting comment on the "Vieniamore" of Righini to which Beethoven wrote twenty-four variations. So silly is the air which he has set himself to vary that we are almost tempted to consider the work as a specimen of what his waggish nature could do with the most unpromising materials he could find<sup>1</sup>. Many critics have scoffed at the Waltz from Diabelli which

1. Stanford, "Musical Composition".





he has used so marvelously. Hans von Bülow, however, does not hold this opinion but considers the theme exceedingly well chosen<sup>1</sup>.

### III TYPES OF VARIATIONS.

There is a marked difference in the kind of variations used by different composers. The earlier ones are rather simple and quite obvious; in some of the Beethoven variations it is impossible for the ordinary listener, at first hearing, to detect any connection between the variation and the original theme. Riemann states that "as a rule a variation transforms only one or a few elements of the theme; time, rhythm, harmony, or melody"<sup>2</sup>. Sometimes, however, we find only one left; a variation oftentimes being built upon the harmonic foundation and with no other connection with the theme. Changes in time and key frequently occur. While these differences make the work more difficult to follow, they also make it more pleasing to the ear. Yet there should be a connecting link. "As some peculiar feature in the face of an ancestor will often reappear in his descendants, even when in other respects they are unlike, so in variations the family likeness will be preserved in the children of the theme"<sup>3</sup>.

### IV VARIATIONS OF HAYDN AND MOZART

The variations of Haydn and Mozart belong to the more obvious type. Especially in those of Mozart the theme may be followed with ease through each variation. There is a great deal of difference in the handling of the variations by these two masters. Those of Haydn show great variety and are on the same plane as his best compositions for clavier. He uses great freedom in his treatment of the theme.

1. Beethoven's Piano Variations, edited by von Bulow.

2. Riemann: Dictionary of Music.

3. Stanford, "Musical Composition".



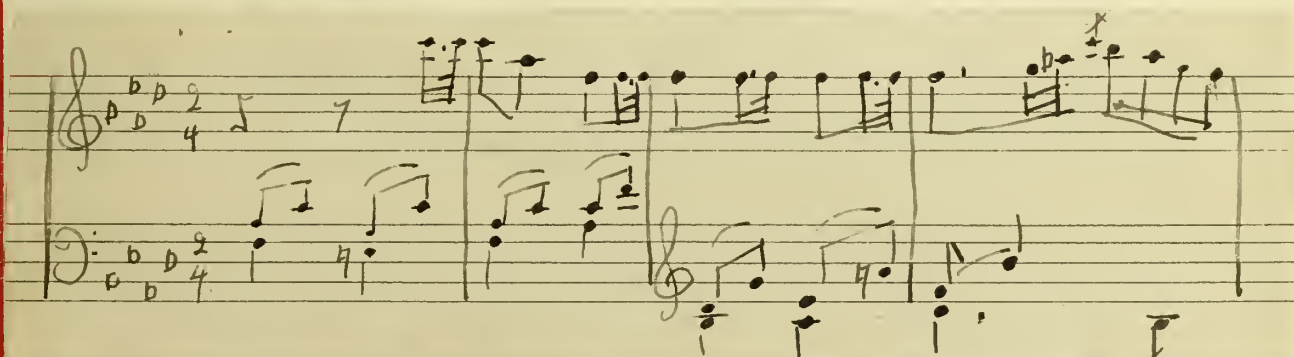
Sometimes he even alters a whole passage, making use of new and apparently unrelated material. The variations of Mozart, on the other hand, do not belong with his more serious work. Most of the time he used themes which were not his own, and there was no attempt to make the variations new and unusual. The theme is easily recognized, and there is great similarity between the plans of the various sets. There was often a change from major to minor throughout the whole group. While variations show Haydn at his best, quite the contrary is true of Mozart. Both often used simple and popular airs for themes<sup>1</sup>.

#### La Roxelane

Of the Haydn variations one of the simplest sets is the one on "La Roxelane". the theme is in C minor, the first variation in C major, and the minor alternates with the major through the whole composition. There is little ornamentation and practically nothing of interest in this.

#### Andante con Variazioni

One of the best is the "Andante con Variazioni" in F minor. In this there are only two variations and a Finale. The Andante is longer than the usual theme and is really composed of two themes. The first is in F minor.



1. Grove: Dictionary of Music and Musicians





After a few measures this is reversed, the right hand taking a similar harmonic progression, the left hand having the melody. The second theme takes up the key of F major.



The whole Andante is rather more elaborate than the ordinary theme to which variations are written. Through both of the variations the harmony remains practically the same with, however, more ornamentation in the other part.

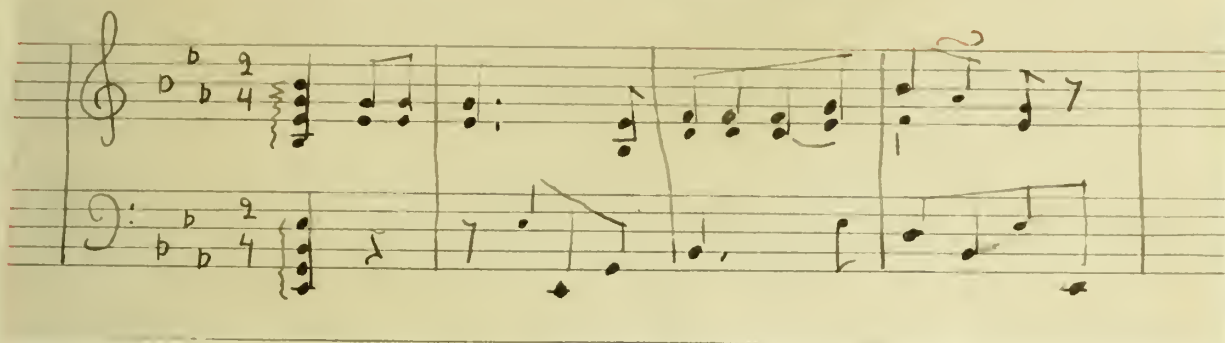


The second variation makes use of runs and trills of more elaborate character than in variation one. This is followed by the Finale which is founded upon the first part of the theme.

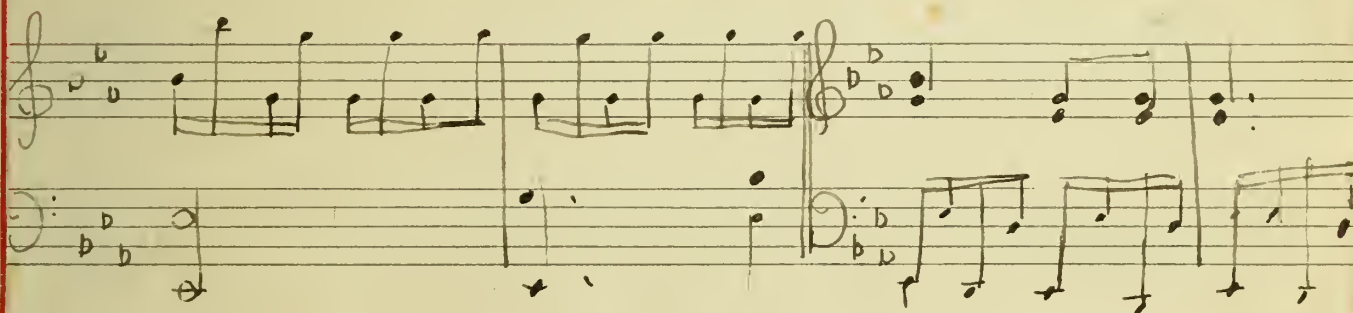
#### Je Sens Lindor

The variations of Mozart upon "Je Sens Lindor", while in some sections it is extremely commonplace, present some interesting figures.





In the second variation the theme is woven into runs, the real melody occurring off the main beat. The fifth variation is of the simplest type, the melody being in broken octaves in the right hand. In the sixth this is reversed, the broken octaves coming in the left hand.



The ninth and tenth are very much like these two, but this time the octaves are in thirty-second notes instead of sixteenth notes. It gives an effect not unlike that produced by some of the variations on hymn-tunes such as "Sweetbye-and-bye" and others which are sometimes heard in unmusical communities. The other variations in this series are, however, more interesting. Number eight is in E-flat minor. The twelfth and last is in three-four, instead of four-four time. Although this is not one of his best groups, it cannot be said that Mozart excelled in the writing of variations.



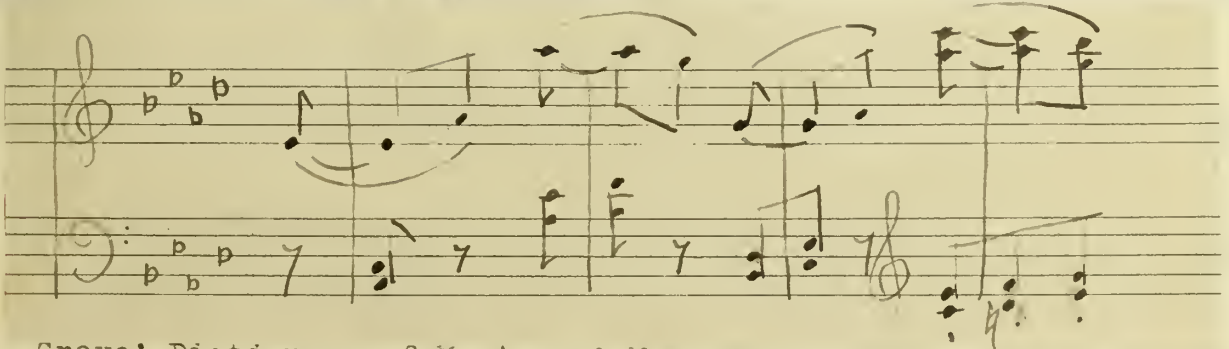


## V VARIATIONS OF BEETHOVEN

The Variations of Beethoven are very numerous and especially good. Thematic development is a point in which Beethoven was a master, and his habit of careful and constant revision of all his work make his variations free from the weaknesses of those by Mozart which show lack of serious thought. Beethoven was never commonplace, but always gives something worth while in his variations. He is a resourceful writer, and the new Romantic element is beginning to make its appearance in his work. He often uses a very free form, but after a variation in which the theme is almost lost sight of he usually brings in one which gives the theme a prominent place<sup>1</sup>.

### Sonata in A Flat.

The most frequently played of Beethoven's Variations are those in A flat, the first movement of the Sonata, Opus 26. This is built on an especially beautiful theme which easily admits of variations. Variety is given to it in the middle section. After sixteen measures a counter melody appears in the left hand. The theme ends with a few measures of the first melody. In this set the theme is rather easily followed although not at all to an extent which makes it monotonous. In the fourth variation Beethoven makes use of a sort of dialogue form of variation. This form has often been imitated by later composers and especially by Mendelssohn<sup>2</sup>.



1. Grove: Dictionary of Music and Musicians.
2. Beethoven Sonatas: Bulow and Lebert.



The fifth is a very lovely variation. In the middle section an interesting effect is gained by putting the counter-melody, which was originally in the right hand, into the left for a very few measures. The variation ends with a dreamy coda which is very effective. This number is popular with piano students and is often played. It does not present the technical difficulties of some of his other variations.

#### Sonata in G

The second movement of the Sonata in G, OP 4, No. 2, is in the form of a Theme and Variations. There are only three variations and in each the theme is followed closely. Each also makes use of a form of syncopation. This similarity is only possible in a short work of this kind.

#### Variations in C Minor

Perhaps next in popularity to the A-flat Variations are the "Thirty-two Variations on an Original Theme in C-Minor". This uses a very short theme of eight measures which Grove says is really a Chaconne<sup>1</sup>. Most of these variations are built upon harmony, not melody. The first three are similar in form. Variation One uses arpeggios in the right hand, Variation Two transfers the arpeggios to the left hand, and Number Three uses arpeggios in both hands. After eleven variations the same theme is given out in the major and there follow four variations in C major". The theme in major, although in outward construction nearly identical with the prototype has, as here contrasted with it exactly the significance which belongs to the second so-called lyrical motive in the Sonata movement. The follow-

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1. Grove: Dictionary of Music and Musicians.





ing four major variations are also to be conceived as lyrical, that is melodious"<sup>1</sup>. In only a few of these variations does the melody of the theme occur. The connection is almost entirely through harmony.

#### Eroica Variations

In the fifteen variations on a theme from the "Eroica" Symphony Beethoven has used an interesting device. There is first an introduction in which the melody is composed of the bass of the real theme. There are three interesting variations upon this melody and then the real theme is introduced.

#### Diabelli Variations.

Beethoven's most pretentious work in this form is the "Thirty - three Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli." This is a huge and powerful work showing Beethoven's wonderful abilities. Hans von Bülow says of it: "All evolutions of musical thought and tonal phantasy, from the sublimest imagination to the most reckless humor, in an incomparable wealth of form and expression, are most eloquently manifested in this work. As an object of study it is practically inexhaustible." This composition is seldom heard. It is very long and so difficult to play that it takes unusual technical skill.

#### Six Variations on an Original Theme.

Besides these more important sets, Beethoven has written a large number of less pretentious variations, most of them being on well known melodies. In Opus 34, "Six Variations on an Original Theme", each variation is in a different key. The theme is in F, the variations are in the keys D, B flat, G flat, E flat, C minor, and the last in F. Except for the last, each new key is a minor third below

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1. Hans von Bülow: Beethoven Variations for Piano.



the previous one. No composer has given as many excellent works in this form as Beethoven.

#### VI SCHUBERT'S IMPROMPTU IN B FLAT

Schubert was not skilled in counterpoint and thematic development. Consequently his variations do not have as great depth as do those of the greater masters. However, the Impromptu in B-flat has been a favorite with piano students and is really a very attractive, graceful composition. It might be claimed that the theme itself does not have sufficient variety. The second part, although modulating for a few measures into a different key, keeps the same rhythm as the first part. There is nothing striking nor unusual in the composition. Several of the variations are made by means of runs and ornaments, others make use of syncopation. It is an unpretentious yet an interesting and beautiful composition.

#### VII VARIATIONS OF WEBER

From the time of Beethoven to the time of Brahms there are no strikingly unusual contributions in this form or no writers who really excelled in the writing of variations. However, almost all composers made use of at least some extent of the theme and variations, and a number of excellent works of this kind were produced. It was a very popular form with Weber, and a number of his best compositions were written in variation form. The most noteworthy are the opus numbers five, six, seven, twenty-eight, forty and forty-five.

#### VIII VARIATIONS OF SCHUMANN

One of the very successful composers of variations was Robert Schumann. While he was not a successful writer of fugue, the varia-





tion was a form in which his individuality and personality could have full sway. In his compositions there is at times great delicacy of feeling and at other times extreme boldness and vigor. In referring to the "Andante and Variations" Grove says; "His devices are less<sup>1</sup> noticeable for ingenuity than for the boldness with which he gives a thoroughly warm, free, romantic version of the theme, or works up movements of nearly equal proportion with it". The Etudes Symphoniques", which is regarded by some musicians as the best of Schumann's compositions, is written in the form of a theme and variations. Here again he shows great freedom in his treatment of the theme. Matthews calls them fantasies rather than variations, for often the theme comes in only a very little and in some of them it apparently does not appear at all. It is a very beautiful piece of music. "It would be impossible to find within the same compass a similar number of pages covering so wide a range of beautiful pianoforte effects, and highly suggestive and poetic music"<sup>2</sup>.

#### IX MENDELSSOHN VARIATIONS SERIEUSES

His contemporary, Mendelssohn, however, does not have the same grasp of variations as Schumann. He does not seem to appreciate the possibilities of this branch of composition. His variations are more of the type of Mozart's. They lack freedom and imagination and cling to the theme a little too closely. The "Variations Serieuses" is really a beautiful composition, especially in certain parts, but its close adherence to the theme tends to make it, in spite of beautiful effects and good qualities, somewhat tiresome. It is difficult to put enough variety and coloring into the playing of it to make it an

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1. Grove: Dictionary of Music and Musicians.  
2. Matthews: Popular History of Music.



effective piece.

#### X VARIATIONS OF CHOPIN

There are several groups of variations by Chopin for piano and orchestra and also a number for piano alone. Almost always they begin with an introduction of two or three pages in rubato style before the theme is given out. The variations as a rule, follow the theme rather closely, the melody is noticeable in nearly all of them. Two of the piano variations, Opus Twelve, and the "Variations sur un air national allemand" (posthumous), although not of his important works are rather graceful, attractive compositions. The second takes for its theme a Polish folk-melody which is very interesting, and through four variations the theme is quite prominent. The last changes from four-four to three-four time and is freer than the others, being extended somewhat and bringing in a coda based on the melody. Although the melody is very noticeable, the whole piece is short enough to warrant the repetition.

#### XI GRIEG'S BALLADE IN G MINOR

Grieg has written variations on a Norwegian melody in the "Ballade in G-minor". Here we have a theme with a decidedly Norwegian melody and harmony, and Grieg has worked it into a rather brilliant group of variations in a free style.

#### XII VARIATIONS IN TWO-PIANO COMPOSITION

For two-piano compositions the theme and variations has become very popular. Among those which are most often heard are the "Andante and Variations" by Schumann, Saint Saens "Variations on a Theme by Beethoven", "Variations on a March from I Puritani" by Liszt, and "Romance and Variations" by Grieg. The form is especially well adapted to works for two pianos, and later writers are also





making very great use of it.

### XIII VARIATIONS OF BRAHMS

The greatest writer of variations since Beethoven is Brahms. In fact, these two with Bach, hold a place in variation-writing which no other composer has approached. The variations of Brahms show entire knowledge of the possibilities of the form and mastery of its principles. There is great freedom of treatment, rich imagination and especially deep intellectual power in them. Huneker states that his ability in this line is nearer to that of Bach than<sup>1</sup> of Beethoven although he uses Beethoven's freer style of treatment.

A curious rhythm appears in the "Variations on a Hungarian Air". There is a double time signature, three-four and four-four. The first measure has three beats, the next four and so they alternate through the composition, making really a rhythm of seven beats. The "Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Handel" has already been referred to as being the most pretentious. But of great importance also are the "Paganini Variations", the "Variations on a Theme of Schumann" for four hands and "Variations on an Original Air in D". In these as in all his work Brahms shows great individuality which effects the rhythm, melody and musical figures. "He applies such devices as condensation of groups of chords, anticipations, inversions, analogies, chromatic passing-notes, etc., with an elaborate but fluent ingenuity which sometimes makes tracing of a theme in a variation a difficult intellectual exercise<sup>2</sup>."

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1. Selected Piano Compositions of Brahms. Preface by Huneker.  
2. Grove: Dictionary of Music and Musicians.



#### XIV CONCLUSION

After studying the Variations of Bach, Brahms and Beethoven it would seem that with them the possibilities of the form had been exhausted. However it is not really a set form but rather a type of composition, and its excellence depends not so much upon knowledge of the rules as upon originality and imagination. There may be numerous new types of variations used by each great composer. It is certain that the composer who has ability in the writing of really good variations makes use of this in composition of sonatas, symphonies and larger works. The development of the theme into variations forms the groundwork for thematic development in other compositions. It is possible that the form may be used even more extensively in the future.





VARIATIONS ANALYZED.

Composer	Title	No. of Var.	Type
Haydn	La Roxelene	5	Melodic
Haydn	Andante con Variazioni	2	Structural
Mozart	Je Seus Lindor	12	Melodic
Beethoven	Sonata A-flat Op. 26 First movement	5	Structural
Beethoven	Sonata in G Op. 14, No. 2	3	Melodic
Beethoven	C minor Variations Op. 91	32	Structural
Beethoven	Eroica Op. 35	15	Structural
Beethoven	Diabelli Waltz Op. 120	33	Structural
Beethoven	Variations on Original Theme Op. 34	6	Structural
Schubert	Imprompty in 3-flat Op 142 No. 3	5	Structural
Chopin	Variations Op 12	4	Melodic
Chopin	Variations on National Air (posthumous)	5	Melodic



Complete List of Beethoven Variations.

- Opus 34. Six Variations on Original Theme.
35. Variations with Fugue on Theme from Prometheus.
76. Six Variations in D.
120. Thirty-three Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli.
159. Variations on a Theme by Waldstein.
160. Variations on Melody to Goethe's "Ich denke dein".
177. Twenty-four Variations on Righini's "Vieni amore".
178. Thirteen Variations on Dittersdorf's air, "Es war einmal".
180. Variations on Paisiello's "Nel cor puo".
181. Variations on Minuet from Harbel's ballet "Le Nozze Disturbate".
182. Variations on Wranizky's "Waldmarchen".
183. Variations on a Swisster.
184. Gretry, "Une Fievre Brulante".
185. Salieri, "La Stressissima".
186. Variations on Winters "Kind willst du".
187. Variations on Süßmayes "Tandeln und scherzen".
188. Six Variations on an Original Theme.
189. Variations on "God Save the Kind".
190. Variations on "Rule Britannia".
191. Thirty-two Variations.
192. Variations on "Ich Lab ein kleines Huttchen nur".



Other Important Variations.

Schubert. Variations on French Air, Op. 10.

Schubert. Variations on Waltz by Diabelli.

Schubert. Variations on Herold's "Marie" Op. 82.

Schumann. Variations on Name "Abegg", Op. 1.

Chopin. Variations on La d'are la mano" Op. 2.

Chopin. Variations on "Je vends des scapulaires", Op. 12.

Brahms. Variations on Theme by Schumann, Op. 9.

Brahms. Two Variations, Op. 21.

Brahms. Variations and Fugue, Op. 24.

Brahms. Twenty-eight Variations on Theme by Paganini, Op. 35.

Rubinstein. Theme and Variations, Op. 88.

Liszt. Variations on Bach's B minor Mass.





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